ILIAS at Vienna University: Bottom up and Top down

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Abstract:

The University of Vienna has adopted ILIAS as a test platform for its current elearning initiative. This decision was partially based on the successful employment of ILIAS at the University's Department of Philosophy, which is reviewed and summarized in this talk. A brief assessment of the strategic planning process at Vienna University and its possible implications for the ILIAS community concludes the presentation.

1 Teaching with ILIAS: 2 Case Studies

The ILIAS server installed at the Department of Philosophy is currently offering two clusters of teaching units of very different character. A „Hegel Project" lead by Herbert Hrachovec is exploring the platform's suitability to support content development by a small group of peer authors, whereas a second approach aims at developing an electronic substitute for a large-scale lecture course in psychology (Christiane Spiel and collaborators).

1.1 ILIAS reflections

Philosophers, and in particular Hegel, are typically aware of the constitutive role of mediation in attempts to apprehend or produce cognitive content. The Hegel group did, consequently, at length discuss the formative influence of ILIAS' educational design on the possible shape of knowledge production. Three topics deserve to be mentioned:

- linear sequence versus hypertext

- structural constraints versus free style writing

- results versus process

The ILIAS authoring tool supports two conceptually diverging paradigms of writing, i.e. a sequential procedure familiar from traditional approaches and a hypertextual approach that can be implemented by arranging „free pages" generated independently from any overarching organization of the material offered. While it is technically feasible „to have it both ways", actually mixing those options turned out to be difficult. The relevant features seem in need of a conceptual overhaul.

Generalizing this difficulty one can see ILIAS as trying to find a working balance between, on the one hand, the well-intentioned ideal of a production tool guided by a pre-defined grammar (a „Document Type Definition") and, on the other hand, the real-life demands of support for „quick-and-dirty" ad hoc arrangements of teaching materials. From a philosophical background the issue can be put as a dispute concerning freedom generally: does this consist in the ability to proceed unconstrained from external interference or are there more substantive constraints to be met for freedom to deserve its name? Motives arising from handling the platform at this point can be seen to interfere with Hegelian philosophy proper.

A similar situation arises with regard to the distinction between process and result. ILIAS places considerable emphasis on collaborative work, yet there is only limited support for the explicit shaping of the common writing process. There is a strong presumption that teaching units - rather than group processes - are the desired outcome of collaboration. While this is certainly a sensible position in a majority of cases, it seems to be at odds with some pedagogical principles underlying the ILIAS model.

1.2 Employing ILIAS in a large scale Psychology Course

Within the new Psychology curriculum, the lecture "Forschungsmethoden & Evaluation" is mandatory for all psychology students. In 2004/05, we expect 380 students to participate in the course. (Lecturer: C. Spiel, Tutors: D. Strohmeier, P. Gradinger, A. Aichinger, B. Zens). Besides content related goals, the acquisition of self regulated learning styles is a main concern. Students are weaned off passive "consumption" of lectures. Instead, they are encouraged to develop self-directed knowledge management skills. Furthermore, social skills in virtual communication as well as teamwork are trained and promoted. Finally, it is an objective of e-lecturing to raise media competence of participating students.

The didactical concept of the course (VEL, Vienna E-Lecturing) corresponds well with the concept and features of ILIAS. In particular, ILIAS can promote a learning environment which allows self-regulated and collaborative learning.

The implementation of the didactical concept takes place by self regulated acquisition of theoretical knowledge, whereas online tests are used for controlling the learning process. In addition, practical problems are solved in small virtual teams. The group concept of ILIAS supports these aims as each group forms its own small closed unit which has the ability to share files within the group management system as well as exchanging information on the internal, closed discussion board. Knowledge transfer across all

participants is enabled by content related discussions. Related to both the didactical concept of VEL and the concept of ILIAS, students receive on-going support by the staff. Besides the development of the team tasks and the online tests, content related feedback to the tasks at hand is provided and organizational as well as technical questions are answered.

Problems with ILIAS (version 2) mainly arise from the insufficient features for user and content administration. The deficiencies of communication and collaboration tools are also creating minor problems.

2 Elearning at the University of Vienna: Strategic Remarks

Technologies are embedded in social setting, this much is evident for Humanities scholars. Yet, those scholars are ill prepared to deal with the complex patterns of technical expertise, economics and power that governs decision processes in actual policy making. Installing an elearning platform for personal use may be a rewarding experience, promoting it on an institutional scale is another thing altogether. Roughly speaking four distinctively different agencies take part in the strategic planning process deciding the future of computer-assisted teaching at Vienna University.

Rector and vice-rectors have taken up the issue as a timely addition to the Universities profile. This runs under the general heading of „Tradition and Innovation". Secondly, the central computing service (ZID) has been approached to take care of the technical side of the project. A third agency is the strategic unit „Lehrentwicklung", a bureau assisting the development of pedagogical resources on a university-wide scale. To put it succinctly: none of these decision making bodies have a profound knowledge of the state of the art, nor have they made themselves familiar with ongoing e-teaching in any detail.

This situation is not uncommon when technical innovations have to be assimilated into an organization by a political process. A group of „experts", basically everyone who has been experimenting with elearning at the University in recent years, has been convened to assist with the decision making. It is – to no ones surprise – a heterogeneous assembly. Yet, partial consensus, to be reported in the full paper, has been reached on several contested issues.